



A Supervisory Newsletter from the Employee Advisory Service (EAS)

THE FRONTLINE SUPERVISOR

Helping You Manage Your Company's Most Valuable Resource – Employees

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Website: <http://hr.dop.wa.gov/eas.html>

■ Q. What role does the Employee Assistance Program (EAP) play in reducing the likelihood of grievances filed by employees in organizations?

A. EAS (your EAP) plays a preventive role in resolving personal problems that can contribute to conflicts with management. This reduces grievances. In other words, a troubled employee helped is a risk reduced. But there are times when the grievance process could be beneficial. Although it can be time-consuming, the process can resolve disputes that would otherwise pose even greater risks to all concerned. When helping employees with personal problems, considering the needs of both the organization and the employee is often part of the EAP helping process. The ability to find this balance is the heart of EAP work and is what makes EAS so helpful. Sometimes the first and best step in any grievance process is talking with the supervisor. EAS can help employees do this more effectively.

■ Q. My employee used to take initiative and was an outstanding performer, but in the past year she has become an average performer. I can't refer her to EAS because her performance is still satisfactory, right?

A. Your employee's performance might register as satisfactory on a formal review but still not be consistent with her potential. It is appropriate to document and describe this. Although you may not be justified in taking an administrative action, you do have reason to make use of EAS. Consider asking your employee why her performance has changed so dramatically over the past year. Remember, this is not playing the role of an armchair diagnostician. Your employee may offer a personal problem as an explanation. At that point, you could encourage using EAS to deal with it. Later, if the performance problem continues, a supervisor referral may be necessary, regardless of whether your employee disclosed something personal as its cause.

■ Q. What are the key ingredients supervisors should consider when helping an employee correct performance?

A. Helping an employee correct a performance problem should include steps proven to facilitate change. This process will occur within the context of the relationship you have developed over time. Managing people is both an art and a science, and correcting performance is part and parcel of that process. Three important steps in correcting performance are often neglected by supervisors: 1) Place emphasis on the problem rather than on the employee. This approach elicits a problem-solving partnership with the employee rather than a defensive reaction brought on by guilt and blame. 2) Involve the employee in analyzing the problem. You may be certain of the problem's cause, but helping your employee analyze and examine the cause will instill greater commitment to resolve it. 3) Follow up with your employee. This step reinforces your employee's investment in correcting the performance problem and helps avoid setbacks.

■ Q. Our agency is very political. Doing everything just right and being seen with the right people are rewarded. Making mistakes or appearing out of line is not. I am worried that such a work culture could taint an employee's career if he or she went to EAS.

A. The history of EAP development includes fear and concern among cautious agencies and commissions. This was particularly true during the 1970's, when the stigma of seeking help for personal problems was considered by many to be more trouble than it was worth. Despite it all, well-utilized EAPs have now emerged even in the most hesitant of organizations. It became clear that confidence in the EAP overcame the stigma of seeking help. This is aided by: 1) top management endorsement of the EAP, with its endorsement well promoted; 2) an EAP policy and mechanisms to ensure confidentiality; 3) workforce interaction with the EA professional staff, resulting in visibility and familiarity among potential users; and 4) longevity of the EAP. Every level of the organization will eventually use EAPs that are well established. This, in turn, improves their acceptance. Many people presuppose that police officers might not use an EAP for the reasons you cite, but EAPs that serve police organizations often have high utilization rates. Indeed, once trust is established, the program flourishes. EAS offers a variety of trainings and services to help with acceptance and familiarity. Call your nearest office for details.

■ Q. It's my nature to get emotional, curse, and slam objects on tables, etc, when under stress. I am sure it rattles some people's nerves, but I really think my employees understand that's just the way I am. Is there any reason to change my style?

A. You need to take steps to manage your stress differently. Employees often offer each other mutual support to cope with temperamental supervisors who are prone to emotional outbursts. Your employees may appear to understand you and remain loyal. They may not confront your behavior because they are coping in another way. EAS can help. Employees may "understand you," but you risk being accused of creating a hostile or offensive workplace should you ever need to take action against a worker with performance problems. Your behavior might be used as a way to excuse substandard performance. This could be difficult to argue against. Even worse, a troubled employee who resigns could blame you for feeling forced to quit. This could have serious ramifications for your agency.

NOTES:

Past issues of the Frontline Supervisor are available on the EAS website at:
<http://hr.dop.wa.gov/eas.html>

